HAMILTON COUNTY - AURORA COUPLE PROVIDES HOME AND HAVEN FOR TEENAGE GIRLS

Paul and Marty Harding have been creating a "warm, welcome and comfy" atmosphere of foster care for 33 years

If home is where the heart is, Paul and Marty Harding have two of the biggest hearts in Aurora.

The couple has opened their home to teen-age girls for 33 years, taking them into the shelter of foster care from almost every imaginable situation.

It's not that they intended to spend their retirement years taking kids to and from school, or making sure they get to music lessons or make curfew.

But when you enjoy changing lives as much as they do, it's hard to quit.

The couple moved to Aurora in 1970 when Paul's job as a state trooper transferred him there. The family included two little boys, and when the couple didn't think they would be able to have more children, they adopted a little girl. As they were going through the adoption process, Marty discovered she was pregnant.

"So the other little girl came eight months later," Marty laughs. "We we're blessed with four children."

The loving atmosphere didn't go unnoticed in the Harding home. Following the adoption, Paul and Marty were approached by the Nebraska Children's Home Society asking if they would consider fostering a child.

Marty's first reaction was indecision. "Then I thought ...maybe. We had a foreign exchange student before. So we decided it ought to be a girl because Paul was so busy being a state trooper," Marty reasoned.

One teenage girl soon turned into two, followed by three and then four as time went by. Today, there are seven teens living in the Harding home, which over the years has grown into a seven-bedroom house. "My husband is handy with a hammer and he always teases there is so much estrogen in the house he has to use some testosterone," Marty jokes. "He likes to renovate, so we made the bedrooms with lots of girlie stuff. We are a group home, but I think it's important for children to feel a home instead of an institution.

"Just because our label is a foster home, children need to feel like they have a home, not that they're sent off someplace to serve a time," Marty adds. "We run it like a mom and pop situation. They're here for a variety of reasons, and the home needs to feel warm and welcome and comfy."

PAUL RETIRED IN 1996 and now dedicates himself full-time to the care of their foster family.

"It's really nice for the girls for two reasons," Marty said, "Number one, he's a strong male role that's healthy. Plus they always see law enforcement as a bad guy and they see him now as a regular Joe and a big teddy bear. The other part of it for me is it's been really nice for him to go to the court hearings because I don't always understand how to deal with attorneys and judges and that just comes natural to him. I can do the maternal things, bake the cookies and do the nurturing -- he does that to -- that's just more of my area."

Three of the seven girls will be going home this summer to be reunited with their families. Unification is the goal of foster care while some of the older teens work towards independent living, especially if unification is not an option. Training and education are constantly being taught in a wide variety of life skills, from nutrition and how to budget to making sure they have their high school diploma.

"There's a lot of laid back days," Marty adds. "I'm not able to do gardening and a lot of the things other women are able to do, but I spend a lot of time with -- I call them my babies -- doing a lot of playing and horse play. We play a lot of board games together and the kids love it."

The Harding's also transport the teens to and from school, to therapy, music lessons and sports and a variety of activities as well as spending time with the girl's families to gain unification.

But they don't profess to doing the job alone.

They work with professionals who have been in the trenches themselves, and with the children's parents. "We look at their problems together, loving each other and disagreeing together," Marty explains. "We're all of these things together but when we're done with that session or meeting there's a coming together at what we're going to work on. I get so excited about that because the child sees promises for the future."

THE TOUGHEST PART for these loving foster parents is when they have to admit they can't do anything for a child and have to pull back. When a child needs a higher level of care or education, it's also important that the need is recognized as soon as possible. "You want to help everybody but you have to know what your limitations are," Marty says. "It's hard because you love that child very much but you have to know when it's enough. There's times when a child is a battered victim or has an addiction that the treatment is beyond you. That's what love is, it's called tough love. You have to see that they get the best care."

This foster 'mom and pop' also find that humor is an essential ingredient: "You have to have a good sense of humor. One of the girls that's deaf and was having such trauma. Paul taught the girls how to play rummy and they had so much fun. They had never played it before."

The teens stay in group foster care anywhere from six months to a year. Communication is a constant priority and the family takes part in regular sessions, discussing such things as how to pick a boyfriend and what traits to look to for so cycles of violence aren't repeated.

Paul and Marty believe the best way to teach wise choices and moral standards is to be a role model. Many of their foster children find it surprising that they have been married 42 years. "They will say to us, 'you've only been married once! And for how long'?" Marty shares with humor. "A lot of them aren't used to that."

And it doesn't take long for the teens to link up. "They bond because they don't think anybody in the outside world understand," Marty adds.

When the time has come for the teen to return to their home or to independent living, it's difficult for these parents to see them leave the foster nest. "But we let them see us cry. Crying is something they may have never seen. Apologizing is another. When we apologize for getting upset or if we made a mistake, they get really overwhelmed with that. They are not used to an adult apologizing or saying I messed up." It also takes some of the teens a long time to "trust the touch" as Marty puts it. Their nurturing includes lots of hugs and touches of loving assurance mixed with patience

And along the journey they take pictures.

Lots of pictures.

Of all the good times in the family and the family members. They're put into albums for each girl to take with them when they leave so that when they have children of their own, they can pass on good memories to the next generation as well as having good memories of their own.

THE SUCCESS OF the Harding's parenting is evident in the extra phone calls Marty receives on Mothers Day from girls who have been in foster care. Then there's the graduation and wedding invitations, and for Paul, it often means being the father of the bride. "He just walked another one down the aisle a while back," Marty laughs. "He's done that quite a few times. Last year he had to wear cowboy pants and boots. Sometimes (the wedding) is different. You have to go on their level.

"The best part is seeing them successful. One of our senior girls is going into the Army into the medical field. The recruiter was really impressed with her and we're really excited about it."

When this full-time mom and dad of seven teenagers need a vacation, their children -- who grew up with foster children - relieve their parents to take a travel break.

What the Harding's do find stressful is when funds get cut for foster families. "I know there are cutbacks with everything, but foster care always gets skipped," Marty notes. "Some of the foster parents have to have jobs to help supplement their income for all the groceries and gas, and that is real tragic."

This Aurora couple plans to do group foster care until "the state won't license us anymore," Marty jokes. "It keeps me young and vital. I enjoy being here with the kids. I love working with the professionals, it's invigorating and exciting. I love the people I meet and it's fun hearing from them.

"It's just been a lot of beautiful things," she says with maternal satisfaction.

* For additional information about becoming a foster parent, call 1-800-7PARENT